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The UN Arab Human Development Report A Critique

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With great fanfare and evident satisfaction, the UN Development Program and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development in June released the "Arab Human Development Report 2002" (AHDR). The Report, authored by a team of Arab scholars and policymakers with an advisory committee of "well-known Arabs in international public life," is the first UN Human Development Report devoted to a single region. Its release in Cairo was accompanied by a London press conference which received significant attention in the Western media.

The New York Times featured an article, an editorial and a Thomas Friedman column, all applauding the Report's "bluntness" and "brutal honesty" in analyzing what, to the paper, remains the only "substantially unchanged" region of the world. The Times coverage commended the AHDR as a hopeful first step toward "reclaiming [the Arab world's] future." As if to further emphasize the Report's radical credentials, one of its lead authors explained to the Washington Post that while the AHDR aims to start a dialogue in the Arab world, "it won't make many friends there."

No doubt many members of the Arab elite would be unfriendly to reforms that actually benefited the bulk of the population. But the

Further Info

The UN Arab Human Development Report is accessible [online](#) at:
<http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/>

Two recent issues of *Middle East Report*, "Behind the Ballot Box" (Winter 1998) and "Reform or Reaction?" (Spring 1999) examine the Arab world's dilemmas of political and economic development in depth. Select articles are accessible online. To order individual copies of Middle East Report or to subscribe, visit MERIP's [home page](#).

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Report's avoidance of the crucial issues of money and power ultimately lessens its value as a tool for achieving its stated goal: a "new social contract in which a synergy is generated between a revitalized and efficient government, a dynamic and socially responsible private sector, and a powerful and truly grassroots civil society." Such a vision is certainly laudable in the abstract, but under present circumstances it can hardly be realized in the US or France, let alone Syria or Morocco.

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IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION

The Report partly lives up to its media billing by, in its words, detailing the "deeply rooted shortcomings of Arab institutional structures" that hold back human development in the era of globalization. Pointing to the "freedom deficit," gender inequality, low levels of health care, education and information technology usage, and high unemployment, the AHDR authors call for urgent reforms lest the Arab world lag further behind the pace of global change. The authors warn that "while most of the rest of the world is coming together in larger groupings, Arab countries continue to face the outside world, and the challenges posed by the region itself, individually and alone." To overcome this isolation the Report calls for a "holistic development" strategy for reaching the new social contract.

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Certainly, the AHDR marks an important contribution to the growing critiques of market-oriented neoliberal development as preached by the World Bank and IMF. Its methodology is based on an expanded version of the Human Development Index designed by Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen. During the 1990s, Sen's Index revolutionized debate about "development," which previously was measured only through purely economic indicators, by gathering statistics measuring "human development" -- life expectancy, literacy, schooling and per capita real GDP -- to achieve a more complete picture of poverty, growth and inequality. The AHDR authors round out Sen's Index, adding data on life-long knowledge acquisition, especially regarding information technology, women's access to societal power and "human freedom."

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"RICHER THAN DEVELOPED"

In a widely quoted phrase, the Report finds that the Arab world is "richer than it is developed." Arab countries have greater resources than some developing countries that rank above them in various indices of human development, particularly those that measure women's status. For example, the maternal mortality rate is double that of Latin America. Despite huge positive strides in the post-independence era, women's literacy still stands at a regional average of 50 percent. As a group, Arab countries score lower than any other region on the Report's index of freedoms -- political and civil rights, independent media and accountability of rulers to the ruled.

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On the positive side of the ledger, the assembled data also demonstrates that the Middle East and North Africa have the most equal income distribution and lowest level of absolute poverty in the world, a feat made possible both by remittances from Arabs working abroad and by a "strong and cohesive system of social responsibility" within Arab society. Yet remittances are unreliable and social cohesion is strained by processes of globalization. Hence the Report urges "employment creation and poverty-reducing growth," increased attention to health care, education and knowledge acquisition related to information technology, and a massive effort to bring women to social and economic equality with men. Such wide-ranging reforms are necessary to counteract the "increasingly unequal distribution [of income] in favor of capital."

MONEY AND POWER

But the model of development offered by the AHDR is not as "holistic" as imagined by its authors. The Report lacks any discussion of how Arab states are to secure the massive amounts of money needed to pay for all of the programs and policies it advocates. How, for example, can the Arab world increase its per capita spending on health care by the recommended two percent of GDP when even optimists forecast world GDP growth at only 3.9 percent (and even less for the Arab world)? How can these countries increase spending on preschool education when their military budgets in the late 1990s constituted an average of 7.4 percent of GDP -- well above the world average of 2.4 percent -- and grew at a rate of at least 5 percent a year? Even Jordan, which devotes the highest percentage of GDP to health and education among Arab countries, still only spends about 3.7 percent on both fields combined. The Report does not recommend reciprocal cuts in military spending to cover the proposed increase in dollars for health care.

Nor does the AHDR offer any scenarios for the Arab grassroots to attain the political power that could produce governments and development policies which are "of, by and for the people." It is inarguably true, as the Report states when calling for large increases in spending on education and information technology, that "modern knowledge is power." Precisely for that reason, most Arab regimes share modern knowledge only selectively if at all, since they have little desire to encourage the kind of bottom-up democracy that policies advocated by the AHDR would engender.

Aside from sections on continuing Israeli occupation, unresolved interstate conflicts and US-led sanctions against Iraq, the Report does not bring "external" power dynamics into the analysis, leaving crucial questions unasked. How could Arab governments radically reduce spending on strategic US and Western products, whether surplus grains or high-tech weaponry, and retain their strategic importance for the US and Western political and economic establishments? How could Arab

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citizens successfully challenge corrupt and autocratic regimes when Western governments turn a blind eye to large-scale abuses of human, civil and political rights by client regimes? Political transformation in the West would surely aid the development of grassroots power in the Arab world.

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MEA CULPA WITHOUT CONTEXT

Much Western media praise for the Report has centered around the fact that it does not simply blame all the Arab world's problems on the West or the confrontation with Israel. While the Report's introspection is by no means the newsworthy event that Western commentators imagine, it is certainly welcome. Surprisingly, however, the AHDR does not mention the effects of the post-September 11 "war on terrorism" on the Arab world's ability to achieve the goals it sets out. Nor does the Report consider the strategic yet marginalized (or better, strategically marginalized) position of the Middle East and North Africa in the larger world political economy. Such lacunae allow the authors to avoid grappling with the cycle of Arab petrodollars for Western arms, the disproportionate and generally increasing military budgets of Arab governments or the disastrous impact of US and European agricultural subsidies (which flood markets with underpriced Western products that force local farmers out of business) that are crucial to the region's perpetual economic dependence on the West.

Such a one-sided treatment has allowed the Western press and policymaking audience to dwell on the subordination of women or the lack of Arab book translations, Internet usage or cultural preservation -- all themes picked up in the stories covering the Report's release -- in a manner that confirms rather than challenges stereotypes. Even the normally critical *Le Monde* uncritically reported the Report's contentions as if they were self-evident. It is precisely because the Report was prepared by "Arabs themselves" that their collective *mea culpa* is useful for the renewed Orientalism of the mainstream press and politics in the wake of September 11.

Thus commentators on the AHDR have placed blame squarely on "Islamic pressure" or the "Islamic factor" for the sad state of the Arab world and its culture. Fouad Ajami, writing in the *New York Times*, admonished Westerners to beware a "dominant and politically powerful" religiously oriented and culturally illiterate lower middle class, one that is irredeemably hostile to "anyone of free spirit." These reactions are doubly incongruous given the near total absence of discussion of religion -- positive or negative -- from the Report itself.

"SOUL OF DEVELOPMENT"?

The AHDR team considers culture "the soul of development," but only one out of 178 pages discusses Islam, and there is seemingly no one

representing a religious background or perspective on the research committee. There is no discussion of debates among Muslims (and among Muslim women) on women, though women's status is perhaps the main concern of the Report. Nor does the AHDR discuss the crucial medical and educational services provided by religious organizations, although it appears from press interviews that the authors intended this omission to be a backhanded critique of them.

At the same time, the authors advocate that "all key stakeholders should be represented in government and education." In many of the countries of the Arab world, however, it is socio-religious movements that offer the political alternative to the state and provide many social services the state does not. Islamist movements, and the reasons for their success, must be addressed in any attempt to forge ahead with policies of reform advocated by the authors of the AHDR.

A VIEW FROM MOROCCO

In Morocco, for example, the AHDR has not generated the intended level of discussion or debate, though the average street kiosk in Fez or Rabat is stocked with myriad books discussing the upcoming parliamentary elections and "Education and Culture in the Time of Globalization." The Report's focus on easily measurable statistics and political markers masks the pressure from below -- from women's, student, labor or Islamist groups -- that, according to Moroccan scholar Taieb Belghazi, has forced the state to devote increasing resources to the welfare of the people.

Islamist organizations have steadily eroded the appeal of secular and statist ideologies, and delivered vital social and educational services efficiently and relatively inexpensively. Their success impelled the late King Hassan II and his successor Muhammad VI to challenge them on their own ideological territory by reasserting the traditional role of the monarch as supreme religious leader. The Moroccan state now sponsors a range of activities from Islamic colleges to soup kitchens during Ramadan, and has generally increased attention to core services for poorer Moroccans. Yet this type of political struggle is not quantifiable like the votes that will be cast in the upcoming September elections, and may not be reflected in the voting patterns of the people who benefit most from it.

While the AHDR might inadvertently justify the political, economic and cultural status quo among Western and Arab elites, in Morocco there is evidence that young people -- cited in the Report as the primary hope for reform in the Arab world -- are finding a way to embrace the ethos of cultural productivity and knowledge acquisition deemed vital to successful reform in the region. On the level of popular culture, a widely available dance and electronica CD in Morocco called "The Orient Beats Back" features Arab-style remixes and re-imaginings of Western dance

music, while an ever expanding section of young urban citizens of Morocco (and of major cities throughout the Arab world) voraciously acquires computer and Internet skills and foreign languages (French and increasingly English). Yet youth culture is scarcely documented in the AHDR.

DIFFICULT UNDERTAKING

The complex intertwining of religion, culture, politics and economics, "Arab" and "external" factors, makes any attempt to assess the state of human development in the Arab world a difficult if necessary undertaking. The compendium of data the Report presents is sorely needed, as is its expanded understanding of "human development."

Yet in its current form the AHDR represents both a missed opportunity and a bad precedent: Arabs and Muslims need to be included in the global conversation on building alternatives to the existing systems of economic, political and social power, but this Report does little to open the way for conversations with progressive scholars and activists in Europe and America, many of whom have yet to overcome the kind of bias against Islam and Arab cultural production and political resistance that the AHDR affirms, however unintentionally. Arab and Muslim activists are still under-represented in the various alternative globalization movements, despite the central role of the Middle East and North Africa in the political economy of the war on terrorism and the neoliberal world system, oil being the clearest example.


The danger is that without such connections -- and a critical understanding of the "external" and cultural factors in Arab human development -- the Arab grassroots may never achieve the critical mass necessary to fuel the societal transformations rightly urged by the AHDR. The impetus for those transformations is unlikely to come from above.

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